

OBITUARY

John Mack Flanagan — DJ on KFRC in '70s spent decades on air

By Sam Whiting

John Mack Flanagan, one of the top names in Top 40 radio at KFRC, “the Big 610,” in the 1970s, died March 31 of congestive heart failure.

Flanagan died in his sleep at home in Daly City, with his wife of 53 years, Joann Flanagan, by his side. He was 71.

“John was one of those people you worked with and you admired,” said Bobby Ocean, who was on the air at KFRC in 1973 when Flanagan joined the station. “You wouldn’t get to KFRC unless you were really good, and John fit in right away. He had presence, this ability to be on the air with such presence that you could feel him as well as hear him.”

Flanagan spent nearly 40 years in Top 40 radio. He started his career when he was in high school only to be interrupted when he was drafted into the Army during the Vietnam War. He carried a tape recorder and interviewed his fellow foot soldiers on dangerous search-and-destroy missions, for later broadcast back home.

Flanagan was a member of the Broadcast Legends, which includes military veterans, and died just two weeks after appearing at their annual luncheon in South San Francisco. An article on the event, featuring a photo of Flanagan in an Army T-shirt, appeared in The Chronicle’s Radio Waves column in the Sunday Datebook last weekend. It had already

gone to press when Flanagan died.

“He is remembered as one of those quintessential Top 40 personalities with a booming voice,” said Radio Waves columnist Ben Fong-Torres. “As I got to know him it turned out his heart was as big as his voice.”

Flanagan was on the air at KFRC from 1973 to 1979. His show followed the famed Dr. Don Rose, who did the morning drive. Rose was hyper with gags and wake-up calls. The voice that followed him was deep and smooth while still energetic enough for AM.

Flanagan would introduce a song, like “Lynin’ Eyes” by the Eagles, by saying, “She lives in a fine mansion on top of the hill. She’s got everything money can buy. The only thing she is missing is true love,” and make it sound like he was issuing heartfelt advice, not just selling a song.

“It wasn’t what he said, it was how he said it,” Ocean said. “The guy on the radio can become your invisible friend and John turned that up some.”

Johnnie Mack Flanagan was born Nov. 15, 1946, in Concordia, Kan., and named after Johnny “Mack” Brown, who was in cowboy movies. Flanagan’s dad was a prosperous car dealer who died young, and Flanagan’s mother moved him to Roswell, N.M. At South Junior High, he met Joann Shields in the hallway, and by the time they reached Roswell High School they were a couple



KFRC 1975

John Mack Flanagan became a KFRC DJ in '73.

for life.

In summer 1964, after his junior year, Flanagan was hired as an on-air host by KRSY, a local country-western station. That was the end of his interest in school, and by graduation he was working full time. Always in a hurry, he and Shields eloped.

On the air, his full name was rhythmic and a better handle than most made-up radio names. But Flanagan could never stand being called Johnnie, so he shortened it by one syllable.

“From the start it was John Mack Flanagan,” Joann said.

On March 31, 1968, as President Lyndon Johnson was telling the nation that he would not seek re-election to concentrate on ending the war, Flanagan was flying to Vietnam to begin his tour in-country. His radio interviews were sent to hometown stations, and Flanagan did enough of them to earn the Army Commendation Medal.

After his discharge, he moved to Tucson to work in Top 40. He was working at a Phoenix station when KFRC recruited him. As Flanagan arrived in San Francisco, Ocean was headed to Los Angeles for a five-year stint at



Jon Winchell

Bay Area Radio Hall of Famers Dan Ethen (left), Michael Bennett, John Mack Flanagan and Steve Dini at a Broadcast Legends panel on the Vietnam War.

KFRC’s sister station.

“I left, he was the new guy,” Ocean said. “I came back, and he was the hero.”

But KFRC was going to reward only one hero, and that was Rose. Flanagan was never paid more than the union minimum of around \$30,000. When he heard that Rose was paid \$300,000, Flanagan protested loudly. He was offered a raise, but it was too little and too late, so he quit KFRC.

He built a studio in his Daly City home and did commercials and voice-overs before returning to the airwaves, where he bounced around through the 1980s and '90s.

His last big break came when KABL-FM became “K-BIG 98.1” playing classic hits from the '70s. Flanagan was hired as one of the first and most prominent DJs. At one point, his ratings nearly topped the market leader, KGO, in the time slot. That job lasted until the format was switched.

After one final short stint at a station in Santa Rosa, he retired from radio in 2000. He got a job in security, wearing a suit and working the front desk at the Embarcadero Center. He lasted there 14

years, longer than he was at any radio station.

“People would recognize his voice,” said his wife. “He was humble about it.”

After retiring in 2014, Flanagan self-published a memoir entitled “Tight & Bright: A Diskjockey Vietnam Memoir.” He also became interested in B Western movies, like the cowboy actor he was named for. He started a newsletter and built a collection of 1,000 Westerns on DVD.

“We watched them over and over again,” Joann said. “We were big fans of the John Wayne movies from the 1930s.”

In 2016, he was inducted into the National Disc Jockey Hall of Fame. He chose to give his induction speech at a senior center in Daly City. There, in a room used for sewing classes, Flanagan described his induction as “the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me. I’ve never had any recognition in my 36-year-and-two-month career. Nobody’s ever said, ‘Hey, it’s you.’”

One year later he was inducted into the Bay Area Radio Hall of Fame. By then he’d been suffering for years from a

heart condition, and his doctor had given him two weeks to live.

“With the grace of God, I’m standing here, but not by much,” he said during his induction speech. “They may have to carry me out on a stretcher.”

But he walked out and walked back in to the Broadcast Legends luncheon six months later. As he was leaving, Flanagan was asked by Fong-Torres to record an introduction for the Internet radio station Moonalice.

Fong-Torres held up his phone, and the voice sounded strong as ever. “Hey there. I’m John Mack Flanagan. You’re listening to Ben Fong-Torres on Moonalice Radio,” he said.

Those were his last radio words.

Services are pending. Survivors include his wife, Joann; daughter, Kelly Ann McLaren of Concord; and granddaughter, Dylan Catherine McLaren.

Sam Whiting is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: swwhiting@sfbay.com Twitter: [@SamWhitingSF](https://twitter.com/SamWhitingSF) Instagram: [@sfchronicle_art](https://www.instagram.com/sfchronicle_art)